

ROBERT PIERPONT BLAKE

(1886–1950)

AT HIS death on May 9, 1950, Robert Pierpont Blake, Professor of History at Harvard, had been a member of the Board of Scholars of Dumbarton Oaks since its foundation in 1942. He had also served as member of the Administrative Committee in 1941–42, as senior fellow in 1942–43, the first year of Dumbarton Oaks as a Harvard Library and Research Institute, and was in residence during that year. Dumbarton Oaks owes much to Robert Blake. Deeply devoted to Byzantine studies, profoundly and widely learned, energetic, enthusiastic, and imaginative, he participated eagerly in the development of Dumbarton Oaks, and his counsel will be sorely missed.

Blake was born in San Francisco (1886) of a pioneer family with many New England connections. He took his B.A. with honors in Greek at the University of California (1908), and in the fall of that year came east to Harvard to study Roman and Byzantine History, receiving his A.M. (1909), and passing the general examination for the Ph.D. in both classics and history (1910). He then went to Germany, and studied at Freiburg and Berlin, where he came under the influence of the great historian of the ancient world, Eduard Meyer. Meyer encouraged Blake to pursue his developing interest in the researches of the Russian archaeologists then engaged in excavating the ancient Greek settlements in South Russia, and advised him to go to Russia and study under Michael Rostovtzeff.

In St. Petersburg for the first time in 1911, Blake was deeply impressed with the richness and variety of the offerings in oriental languages and history, and determined to work not only with Rostovtzeff but with Professor Nikolai Yakovlevich Marr, half Scot, half Georgian, specialist in the Caucasian languages, but master of all the European tongues. In later years Blake often told how Marr's special interests also re-awoke in him an ambition he had cherished in boyhood: the wish to climb Mount Ararat. Blake now went to Armenia, climbed the mountain, and almost simultaneously embarked on what was to prove a lifetime of Caucasian studies. At that time in his career Marr vigorously repudiated all nationalist arguments in linguistics, and this, too, deeply influenced Blake, who permanently retained a healthy skepticism of the emotional in scholarship. He also determined to remain primarily a historian.

After a brief interlude as instructor in ancient history at the University of Pennsylvania (1912–14), Blake returned to Russia in the spring of 1914. Always improving his Russian, he now acquired Arabic and Syriac as well as Armenian and Georgian, and continued to study ancient and Byzantine history. The study of biblical texts now for the first time engaged his attention,

and he became especially interested in the Georgian and Armenian biblical manuscript traditions. In 1916 Blake presented his thesis at Harvard: "Studies in the Religious Policy of Constantine and his Successors," and passed the final examinations for his Ph.D. degree. He then returned to Petrograd, where in 1918 he obtained the degree of Magistrant, entitling him to teach in any Russian state university. The brilliance of his final oral examination made a deep impression on the faculty, and, had the times been less turbulent, it seems probable that he would have been offered a position at the University of Petrograd in the fall of 1918.

However, in the summer of 1918, he was sent by the Russian Academy of Sciences to the Caucasus to begin the work of transcribing and collating the Georgian biblical manuscripts in the libraries and museums of Tiflis, and by fall the civil war made it impossible to return north to Petrograd. So Blake now served for two years as *privat-docent* in the Russian University at Tiflis, as lecturer on German in the Polytechnic Institute, and later, when Georgia became independent, as professor at the State University of Georgia, where he lectured in Georgian on ecclesiastical history. In Tiflis on January 7, 1920, he married Nadezhda Nikolaevna Kryzhanovskaya, who survives him, with their son, Igor Robert, who was born in Boston in 1928.

Though cut off from Europe, and often from news of home, during the years of world war, revolution, and civil war, Blake found various ways to assist the Allies. In the early years of the war the United States had charge of German and Austrian interests in Russia, and in 1915 Blake accompanied an official American tour of inspection to a German war prisoner and internee camp at Vyatka, 800 miles east of Petrograd. Later, in Tiflis, he found himself called upon to act as interpreter for President Wilson's mission to Persia, unexpectedly passing through Georgia on its way west. On one occasion he shouldered a rifle and joined a guard at Vladikavkaz to help protect the city against marauding Ingush tribesmen. In the midst of the turmoil caused by a local Armenian-Georgian war, he wrote intelligence reports on the baffling Caucasian political situation, and did translations first for the British, who arrived in Tiflis in December 1918, and later for the Americans, who came soon after. Testimonials from both British and American authorities acknowledging the great value of his work survive among his papers, and a lively but tantalizingly brief picture of the Caucasian scene is painted in his article, "Ten Days in Ossetia," in the *Atlantic Monthly* for November, 1923.

Thus, before his teaching career at Harvard began in 1920, Blake had been thoroughly grounded not only in the classics, in ancient and Byzantine history, and in Greek palaeography, but in the languages, history, and literature of the Caucasus, peripheral to both Byzantium and Russia, but impor-

tant for a study of either. He was completely at home in at least a dozen languages, and was always prepared to acquire another. To the amusement and despair of his colleagues, all he needed was a dictionary, a grammar, and a text to be read. In this way he added Turkish, Magyar, and other languages to his collection.

At Harvard, Blake was successively instructor (1920), assistant professor (1923), associate professor (1928), and professor (1930). He was Director of the University Library and Syndic of the Press (1928–37), trustee of the Harvard-Yenching Institute (from 1928), and chairman of the preliminary committees for the tercentenary celebration (1935–36). In 1930, he was made an honorary member of the Harvard class of '08.

He taught Georgian and Armenian, as well as courses on the economic development of the ancient and mediaeval Mediterranean world, and on the Byzantine and Ottoman Empires. A strong believer in the tutorial system, he devoted much time and thought to his tutees. His graduate students found that all the resources at his command were at their disposal. Letters to the Vatican, to the monks of Athos, to the Patriarch of Jerusalem, to professors in the Soviet Union, to archimandrites and photographers, Cardinals and diplomats, opened closed doors and brought microfilms of unpublished manuscripts. Blake's rigorous and humane criticism always improved the student's final product.

Blake himself edited a considerable number of biblical, historical hagiographical, and literary texts from Georgian, Armenian, and Greek manuscripts, always furnishing the Georgian texts with Latin translations. He catalogued the Georgian manuscripts in the library of the Greek Patriarchate at Jerusalem, and in the Georgian monastery (Ivion) on Athos, and wrote numerous articles on problems in Byzantine and Georgian economic and literary history. Except for Luke, his edition of the Georgian Gospels had appeared by the time of his death. The Old Testament Books of the Prophets, partly in proof when he died, are soon to follow. It is both tragic and noteworthy that there is no American scholar living who is competent to carry on Blake's work in his special field.

At Dumbarton Oaks Blake initiated and continued to supervise until his death two important bibliographical projects: the formation of a bibliographic index based on the references contained in the *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*; a subject catalogue of all articles pertaining to Byzantine, Slavic and Caucasian studies found in the Russian periodicals of Dumbarton Oaks and the Library of Congress. He participated in several Symposia and, in 1949, he directed the Symposium on *Relations between Byzantium and its Neighbors*.

Though the administrative tasks which came to Blake were various, the most important was the directorship of the University Library, to which he succeeded in 1928 on the death of Professor Archibald Cary Coolidge. Blake's years as director were marked by the continued acquisition of important collections, of which the Gay collection on the Risorgimento and the Schofield collection of Icelandic materials may perhaps be singled out for special mention. At the Widener Library Blake is remembered as a tactful and skillful administrator, intervening in matters of detail only when an urgent problem called for solution, and always paying attention to the special interests both of scholars and technicians.

The work of teaching, scholarship, and administration was punctuated by repeated trips abroad in search of both manuscripts and archaeological remains. Blake took the deepest interest in the technical side of such journeys, corresponding at length with photographic firms in search of the best cameras, and marshalling his supplies and equipment with truly military zeal. In 1921 he went to Athos as leader of an expedition financed by the late J. P. Morgan, while Mrs. Blake continued on to Tiflis, where she was able, in spite of difficulties of all sorts, to complete the photographing of valuable Georgian manuscripts. All the photographs of Greek and Georgian manuscripts collected on this expedition are now in the Harvard College Library as the J. P. Morgan collection. Expeditions to Sinai and the Near East followed in 1927 and 1930. With the late Professor Kirsopp Lake, Blake rediscovered the celebrated Serabit inscriptions written in a proto-Semitic language on a number of rock fragments in an almost inaccessible mountain valley which enjoys virtually unbearable temperature. The excavations at Samaria, of which Blake was joint director, also yielded important finds. In 1935, again with Lake, Blake went to the eastern vilayets of Turkey, and, before moving on to Persia, explored the ancient citadel of Van rising sheer above the Lake, where his old teacher, Marr, had previously conducted an archaeological survey. At the time of his death, he was planning another expedition to Athos, and the preliminary arrangements were already *en train*. No discovery made in Athos or in the distant Caucasus ever delighted him more than the find of a magnificent tenth century Georgian Gospel codex in an old bureau in the Andover Newton Theological School (see bibliography, item 32).

The years of Blake's career at Harvard were rich in honors and in recognition from scholars in the United States and Europe. California, his own University, made him a Doctor of Laws in 1934. He was Lowell Lecturer (1925), Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (1926), and of the Mediaeval Academy (1930), chairman of the American Council of

Learned Societies (1935–38), member of the American Philosophical Society (1943), and of numerous professional societies. Abroad, he served at Oxford as Marjorie Wardrop Lecturer (1921) and as exchange tutor with University College (1923), which awarded him an honorary M.A. (1924). He was exchange professor at the Sorbonne (1938), received the Grande Médaille of the University of Lyon, and was invited (1945) to become a sponsor of the Société des Bollandistes (Brussels).

No tribute to Robert Blake would be complete without mention of his delightful sense of fun. Over British communication lines from Persia he once sent an American friend a long telegram written entirely in baseball terminology, which completely baffled the British authorities. His draft of a formal Greek letter of thanks sent by President Lowell with a gift to the monks of Athos is a masterpiece of solemn parody. The style of his own personal accounts of his travels was always pungent, with a special sort of sesquipedalian and often Rabelaisian humor. Standing well over six feet tall, massive in his later years, strikingly handsome in appearance, warm and kindly in temperament, Blake was much beloved by his colleagues and students.

His sudden death will long be deeply mourned by those who had benefitted from his learning and his wisdom, and who had enjoyed the privilege of his friendship.

ROBERT LEE WOLFF

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